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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the relative importance of several determinants of children's friendship stability: friendship quality, friendship reciprocity, and children's individual characteristics. Also examined were changes in students' friendships across the junior high transition. Measures of friendship and school adjustment were obtained three times across the junior high transition (spring of sixth grade, fall of seventh grade, and spring of seventh grade) from 101 students. Friendship quality and reciprocity were the most important determinants of friendship stability. Students higher in social competence also had more stable friendships. However, the importance of the determinants varied depending on whether friendship stability was measured within a school year or across school years. In addition, children seemed to be choosing their new friends based on different criteria at different times across the transition to a new school. (Author)

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Which Students Keep Old Friends and Which Become New Friends Across a School Transition

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Poster presented at the biennial meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, Albuquerque, NM, April, 1999.

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ABSTRACT

This study was designed to examine the relative importance of several determinants of children's friendship stability: friendship quality, friendship reciprocity, and children's individual characteristics. Also examined were changes in students' friendships across the junior high transition. Measures of friendship and school adjustment were obtained three times across the junior high transition (spring of sixth grade, fall of seventh grade, and spring of seventh grade) from 101 students. Friendship quality and reciprocity were the most important determinants of friendship stability. Students higher in social competence also had more stable friendships. However, the importance of the determinants varied depending on whether friendship stability was measured within a school year or across school years. In addition, children seemed to be choosing their new friends based on different criteria at different times across the transition to a new school.

INTRODUCTION

Stable friendships provide children with a reliable source of companionship and social and emotional support, while unstable friendships serve these functions less well. Moreover, the breakup of old friendships may be stressful in itself (Berndt, 1989). One goal of this study was to identify which kinds of students have more stable friendships, by correlating measures of friendship stability and school adjustment. We expected that children's social competence would be related to their friendship stability (e.g., Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). In addition, previous research has found that higher-quality friendships and friendships that are reciprocal tend to be more stable than lower-quality and unilateral friendships (e.g., Schneider, Fonzi, Tani, & Tomada, 1997). Therefore, in the current study we also tested the hypothesis that friendship stability is determined most directly by the characteristics of a friendship, with only indirect effects of each friend's interpersonal skills and abilities.

The second goal of the study was to examine friends' similarity in various aspects of school adjustment and to see whether information on friends' similarity might clarify which students become friends in a new school environment. Previous research has shown that students are similar to their friends in sex, race, age, and activity preferences, and these similarities are partly due to the formation of friendships between classmates with similar characteristics (see Aboud & Mendelson, 1996). By comparing the pre-transition and post-transition similarities between students and their friends, we were able to examine whether moving into a new social environment had any effects on students' friendship choices. Also of interest was whether during the post-transition interval students changed their friendship choices over time as they had more time to interact with their peers and learned more about them.

METHOD

Participants

101 students (48 girls and 53 boys) participated in the study. The schools were located in a town with a population of about 50, 000 that was adjacent to a larger city in the Northeast U.S. More than 90% of the students were White.

Procedure

Data collection took place during April and May of the students' sixth-grade year (Time 1), during October and November of the students' seventh-grade year (Time 2), and during the following April and May (Time 3). At each time, the participants were interviewed by a member of the research team and asked a series of questions about their best friendships. Measures of social and academic adjustment were obtained from student questionnaires, teacher ratings, and school records.

Friendship Measures

At each time, about 20 percent of the students named only one best friend, 30-40 percent named two best friends, and the remaining 40-50 percent named three or more best friends. When students named more than three best friends, they were asked to name the three closest among these friends.

Friendship quality. A standard series of questions were asked that focused on important features of friendship: intimate self-disclosure, intimate knowledge of one another, companionship or spending time together, faithfulness, and exclusiveness.

One type of question dealt with the frequency of interactions reflecting a specific feature of friendship, e.g., intimate self-disclosure. Students responded on a 5-point scale ranging from never (0) to everyday (4). Open-ended questions allowed students to elaborate on their answers to the initial questions about interaction frequency. Answers to these questions were coded on a 5-point scale (0-4) with higher ratings for answers reflecting a closer friendship. The correlations between the two coders' ratings ranged from .90 to .96 across features for a random sample of about 50 friendships.

The final measure of friendship quality included 11 items. The alpha coefficients for the measure were .68, .78, and .71 at Times 1, 2, and 3, respectively. When students reported on two or three friendships, as most did, their friendship-quality score was the mean score for all the best friendships they described.

Friendship reciprocity. Friendship reciprocity was computed as the number of reciprocal friendships that each student had divided by the number of friendships for which reciprocity could be determined. A friendshi, is judged reciprocal if the peer named as one of a student's three best friends also nominated the student as one of his or her three best friends. Friendship reciprocity was significantly correlated with friendship quality at Time 2 but not Time 1 ($r = .40$, $p < .01$ for Time 2; $r = .14$, $p > .26$ for Time 1), and the correlation approached significance at Times 3 ($r = .25$, $p < .06$).

Friendship stability. For each interval, friendship stability was judged from the proportion of the best friends named at one time who were named among a student's three closest friends the next time.

Social and Academic Adjustment

Harter's (1982) Perceived Competence Scale was used to measure self-esteem and perceived competence. The Class Play instrument as revised by Masten, Morison, and Pellegrini (1985) was used to assess each student's social behavior toward and around peers. Students received a list of all students of their sex in their grade and school who were participating in the study, and named the other students on the list who best fit each of the short descriptions of behavioral dispositions. Final scores were created by totaling the number of nominations a student received on all items linked to each of three dimensions: (a) sociability-leadership; (b) aggression-disruption; and (c) sensitivity-isolation, and then dividing the total by the number of other students making nominations from the same list (see Masten et al., 1985).

Behavioral problems were measured by an abbreviated version of the Devereux Elementary School Behavior Rating Scale (Spivack & Swift, 1966). (Ratings were unavailable for 30 students at Time 1.) The items refer to various problem behaviors, including aggressive or disruptive behavior and withdrawal or inattention. The mean ratings by the two teachers of each student were correlated at $r = .68$, $p < .001$ at

Time 1, and $r = .47$, $p < .001$, at Time 2. Each student's final score was the mean of the two teachers' ratings.

Finally, sixth-grade students' scores on their report cards for their levels of achievement were standardized and used as a measure of their academic achievement. Seventh graders' academic achievement was judged from their grade-point-average.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Friendship Stability across the School Transition

No effects were significant when friendship stability was the dependent variable in an ANOVA with sex, cohort, and interval (Time 1-2, Time 2-3) as factors (ps > .15). Across the transition interval (Time 1-2), 49% of students' friendships remained stable. From Time 2 to Time 3, 55% of students' friendships remained stable. The difference between intervals was not significant (p > 20).

Friendship Characteristics and Friendship Stability

An analysis of variance on friendship quality with sex and cohort as between-subject factors and time as a within-subject factor showed no significant effects, ps > .07. That is, the quality of students' friendships did not change significantly over time. Students whose friendships were higher in quality at the start of a time interval had more stable friendships during the interval (rs = .31 and .40, ps < .01 and .001, for Time 1-2 and Time 2-3).

An analysis of variance on friendship reciprocity with sex and cohort as between-subject factors and time as a within-subject factor revealed no significant effects of any of the factors or their interactions (ps > .18). Correlational analyses showed, as expected, that reciprocity at Time 1 was significantly correlated with friendship stability from Time 1 to Time 2, r = .45, p < .001; reciprocity at Time 2 was significantly correlated with friendship stability from Time 2 to 3, r = .31, p < .05. Thus, students who had more reciprocal friendships at the beginning of an interval also had more stable friendships during the interval.

Social Competence and Friendship Stability

Students who had more stable friendships across the transition were rated by their sixth-grade classmates as higher in sociability-leadership, lower in aggression-disruption, and higher in popularity (see Table 1). These students also were rated by their seventh-grade classmates as more sociable and less aggressive, and seventh-grade teachers rated them as lower in behavioral problems. By contrast, friendship stability from Time 2 to Time 3 was not correlated with any adjustment measures at either time. These

results suggest that the summer between school years posed a special challenge to friendships, and students higher in social competence better met the challenge by maintaining friendships during the summer or by reviving old friendships in the new school year.

Test of the Mediational Hypothesis

Time 1 friendship quality and friendship reciprocity were entered first as predictors of friendship stability from Time 1 to 2 in a regression analysis. Friendship quality and reciprocity accounted for significant variance in friendship stability from Time 1 to 2, F (2, 63) = 10.9, $p < .001$, $R^2 = .26$. Reciprocity accounted for significant additional variance after friendship quality was entered. None of the social competence variables (sociability, aggressive/disruptive behaviors, and popularity) accounted for any significant additional variance after friendship quality and reciprocity were entered. This supports our hypothesis that friendship quality and reciprocity act as mediators of the effects of social competence, and that the most important determinants of friendship stability are the characteristics of friendships themselves. The finding that reciprocity accounted for additional variance suggests that although reciprocity is usually related to higher quality (Newcomb & Bagwell, 1995), the effects of reciprocity on friendship maintenance cannot be completely attributed to this link. It should be noted that the quality measures in this study, as in most studies on children's friendships, reflect only the target child's view of the relationship, whereas reciprocity reflects the friend's view of the friendship which is often different from the target child's. Thus reciprocity implies a commitment from both sides to the friendship.

Friendship Similarity across the School Transition

Table 2 shows that the correlations for friends' similarity in adjustment changed over time. At Time 1, students were similar to their friends in all aspects of adjustment except sensitivity-isolation. At Time 2, students became similar to their friends in sensitivity-isolation, but similarity in aggression-disruption, popularity, and grades disappeared. At Time 3, students were again similar to their friends in popularity and grades but no longer similar in sensitivity-isolation. These differences suggest that students may have chosen their friends based on different criteria at different times. Immediately after the transition,

the salience of the sensitivity-isolation dimension probably increased dramatically and students who were sensitive-isolated typically made friends with others who were shy and withdrawn. Students also had friends who were similar to them in sociability and problem behaviors in the classroom at Time 2. But from Time 2 to 3, the peer group began to stabilize and students eventually ended up having friends with popularity similar to their own. Also, during this period students began to choose and be chosen by friends who were similar to them in academic ability. Thus, during the second interval as students got to know each other more, the similarity pattern shifted toward the pattern at Time 1. These results are consistent with the suggestion in interpersonal attraction research (e.g., Aboud & Mendelson, 1996) that initial attraction to a stranger who is similar in certain dimensions is not necessarily related to long-term attraction, and does not necessarily predict the quality of the relationship.

CONCLUSIONS

1. Friendships that were higher in quality and reciprocity were more stable. Social competence was especially important in friendship maintenance when the environment was less supportive such as during a long summer break. The effects of social competence on friendship stability were mediated by its effects on the quality and reciprocity of friendships.

2. The dimensions along which children are similar to their friends changed at different time points across a school transition. This suggests that children may be choosing friends based on different criteria at different times, and that similarities that lead to initial attraction may not necessarily lead to a long-lasting friendship. In the more fluid social environment immediately after the transition, sensitivity-isolated behaviors became very salient in friendship formation. However, as the students learned more about their peers and the peer group stabilized, popularity and academic achievement again became important.

3. The quality, reciprocity, and stability of students' friendships did not change significantly across the transition interval, suggesting that the school transition did not pose great difficulties for students' friendships. However, future research that spans a longer time period across the junior high transition is needed.

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Table 1

Correlations between Measures of School Adjustment and Friendship Stability

	Friendship Stability from Time 1 to Time 2	
Measure	Time 1	Time 2
Sociability-leadership	.28**	.27**
Aggression-disruption	-.21*	-.27**
Sensitivity-isolation	-.06	-.04
Popularity	.24*	.14
Behavioral problems	-.19	-.27**
Report-card grades	.17	.16

Note. The Ns for the correlations were 101 (except for behavioral problems, for which the N was 71 at Time 1).

*p < .05. **p < .01.

Table 2

Correlations for Students' Similarity to Friends at Each Time

Measure	Time 1	Time 2	Time 3
Sociability-leadership	.40**	.34**	.15
Aggression-disruption	.41***	-.14	.09
Sensitivity-isolation	.09	.46***	.19
Popularity	.36**	-.10	.27*
Behavioral problems	.42**	.52***	.35**
Report-card grades	.58***	.15	.50***

*$p < .05$. **$p < .01$. ***$p < .001$.